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ABSTRACT

The work of teaching faculty in the major disciplines how to teach writing often falls to the writing program administrator (WPA), and this paper explains one WPA's hypotheses, reasoning, and methods used in promoting writing in a college engineering department. Principles underlying the program related to the motivations of faculty and the structure of teaching writing are discussed, and a six-hour seminar required of engineering faculty appointed to teach writing is outlined. Also discussed is the program designed to provide writing tutors to the classes of the members of the engineering faculty who do not want to teach writing, along with the training course required of the tutors. Among the benefits of the program listed are that a large number of engineering students learn to write better and that the tutors become more confident of their own abilities to write and speak persuasively. (AEA)

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NUTS AND NORMALS: HELPING THEM TEACH WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Ellen W. Nold

Helping faculty in all disciplines teach writing is an exciting and often frustrating task. In many institutions, this work falls to writing program administrators. How can WPAs cope with teaching writing across the curriculum? First, they must work from some explicit assumptions; second they must assess the interests of the faculty who propose to promote good writing in their courses. Third, they must define the faculty members' tasks so that they will be successful and, consequently, will continue to accept the extra challenges of writing across the curriculum.

This paper explains the hypotheses, reasoning and methods of one promoter of writing across the curriculum. In the past I have taught faculty in most major disciplines how to teach writing in the Freshman Seminar program at Stanford University. These strange creatures chose to teach writing, and they worked much harder than could be repaid by the extra $250 a quarter they were offered for their service to the University. These are the "Nuts" in my title.

But most faculty are "Normals:" they are not paid extra for their extra attention to writing. They want to promote writing, but not at the expense of their discipline or of their free time.

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They are like the Engineering faculty I work with now as Director of the School of Engineering's Communications Project at Stanford. Dealing with the Normals is a little different from dealing with the Nuts, but the principles are the same. Let me explain.

PRINCIPLES

Two assumptions guide my work. One concerns the motivations of faculty, and the second concerns the structure of the teaching of writing.

First, faculty need to realize reasonable returns from their reasonable efforts. That is, they need to feel that when they teach or promote good writing, their students actually write better. Since most writing evaluated in college courses is submitted at the end of the course and never revised, even professors who assign writing do not feel they are promoting good writing. Without the pleasure of success, what professor of Biology will continue to assign writing once the pressures of the new writing movement subside?

Now, what is a reasonable effort? In order to answer this question, we must first define what teaching writing entails. This definition is our second assumption.

I assume that teaching writing can be divided into five activities: (1) assigning writing tasks, (2) coaching intermediate responses to those tasks, and (3) evaluating learning from task to task (provided that there is logic to the

way the tasks are graduated). In addition to assigning tasks--writing with a well-defined purpose, audience and topic--the instructor may (4) assign exercises--practice of writing skills, unconstrained by considerations of purpose, audience and topic. In both tasks and exercises, the writer puts to practice his knowledge of context and conventions; the instructor may augment the writer's knowledge by (5) assigning readings.

Since professors of nearly every subject do assign tasks to students, they can be cajoled to assign writing tasks, with only a little effort on the part of the WPA. And since they normally assign readings, adding a well-chosen, short reading on a particular writing problem is not too much to ask, either. So (except from the sometimes considerable problems of teaching professors to design good writing tasks or choose good readings) even normal faculty can be expected at least to participate fully in Activities 1 and 5 outlined above. They may be reluctant, nonetheless, to spend valuable "content time" on writing. The WPA can argue, rightly, that time spent on writing can help the students learn the content and the discipline better. Janet Emig and James Britton write eloquently about writing as a mode of learning; I will not repeat their arguments here.

Activities 2, 3 and 4--coaching, evaluating, and assigning exercises--require much more time and sophistication of the faculty than many are likely to want to develop. Consequently, even the nuttiest faculty rebel against also including more than

two of Activities 2, 3 and 4 in their courses. Most likely to be excluded are the exercises on conventions: they are often too irrelevant to the main concerns of the content course. In addition, the Nuts (like the Normals) question the need for coaching and for revision. "It would be much easier," they say to me, "if writing could be taught by red-marking the errors on final drafts of several papers. That would save a lot of time--both mine and my students'." True. But one of my most strongly-held convictions is that writing is not taught efficiently by making red marks to which students need not respond. The teaching cycle is not complete when the professor spends his or her time editing, after which the student merely notes with a sigh the sprinkle (or the deluge) of red. What seems a reasonable effort will not bring reasonable return, and the editing professor will soon tire of his or her under-rewarded efforts.

HELPING THE NUTS

What separates the Nuts from the Normals is their willingness to engage personally in coaching, evaluating and, often, exercise-giving. They are willing, for often improbable reasons, to spend a great deal of their own time teaching students to write. And they are sometimes willing to learn how to teach writing. Because of the reluctance of the Nuts in Stanford's Freshman Seminar Program to learn how to teach writing, I made their appointments as writing teachers contingent

upon their attendance at a seminar on teaching writing. Consequently, I designed a short, six-hour course combining lecture and practice, a course I usually gave in two three-hour sessions. I made the course interesting by inviting discussion and practice whereever possible; in addition, I promoted the faculty's curiousity about each other's seminars and research. In a fairly large, diverse university like Stanford, even the Nuts were unknown to one another.

The usual schedule of the course was:

Hour	Activity
1	Introductions
	Lecture: Goals of courses that meet the writing requirement
	The communication scheme
	Why writing is still hard, even for Stanford Freshmen
	How to make assignments that fit course goals
	Discussion: The elements of good assignments
	(Examples from my own and others' Freshman Seminars)
2	Lecture: Sequencing assignments for increasing difficulty
	Principles of diagnosing writing difficulties
	Practice: Evaluating and diagnosing Freshman papers
	(Examples from my own and others' seminars)
	(Introduction of analytical scales)
	Discussion: Results of diagnoses of at least three papers

3 Lecture: Relationship between quality of papers and quality of assignment

Why revisions are necessary

How to coach

4 Practice: Diagnosis and coaching on two papers that fulfill the same assignment

5 Lecture: How to evaluate progress at quarter's end

How your course will be evaluated

Practice: Characterizing improvement for one student (Example from my seminar)

6 Lecture: Useful texts and workbooks

Useful books for the instructor

(Examples brought to class)

Discussion: Topics submitted by course members at the beginning of the seminar

Wrapup: Thanks and offer of help in times of trouble

Although I recommended (and even offer to supply copies of) Peter Elbow's Writing Without Teachers and Don Murray's A Writer Teaches Writing, only one or two of the Nuts ever read anything about teaching writing. That's to be expected: Nuts want to teach, not to learn to teach. And most of them did very passable jobs, I might add. Those who did not appear to perform at least as well as the average English Department graduate student were given a year to improve and dropped from the teachers' corps if they didn't. Most did better than average, and one was rated the

highest of any writing teacher (including, of course, me) I evaluated in my four years in that position. (He did the reading and took advantage of my little-heeded offers of help in improving his teaching.)

As my course outline suggests, I covered all five Activities I thought the Nuts would be tempted to engage in: assigning tasks, coaching, evaluating, assigning exercises and assigning readings. Although the course was cursory, most instructors found that it fitted their needs. Many even said that it changed their perceptions about the teaching of writing. At least it prevented disasters in the classrooms and the conferences. That's all it was designed to do.

HELPING THE NORMALS

In contrast to the Nuts, the Normals do not need to be taught much because they do not want to engage in the actual teaching of writing. But they will promote good writing, if it can be promoted with much less effort than the Nuts are willing to spend. In the School of Engineering I take the basic goodwill of the faculty and turn it into writing across the curriculum by not requiring that the harassed faculty members do anything but allow a writing tutor or two to work with them on the writing assigned in class. The tutors are responsible mainly for coaching and for evaluating; in most classes they have sole or main responsibility for assigning tasks and readings. (In many cases, they write the readings themselves after boning up on

technical writing forms and the requirements of business communications.) Faculty members reinforce the tutors' efforts by allowing them to give a portion of the grade (from ten to fifty per cent) and by assuring the students that, in the work world, learning to write is as important as learning to compute. Tutors are placed so cunningly in Engineering courses that no Engineering undergraduate can graduate without meeting with a writing tutor twice during his undergraduate years in the regular Engineering courses. This writing help is in addition to the regular University Freshman writing requirement of two quarters of coursework.

The Normals, then, need not be taught anything beyond what the tutors must negotiate with them as directors of the writing instruction in their courses. The Normals must put up with the extra burden of negotiating and coordinating with the tutors, a burden that increasing numbers accept. In fact, this year, the writing tutors are working in thirty different Engineering courses (taught by twenty-five different faculty). Some courses, for instance the senior laboratory course in Chemical Engineering, have been designed with the writing tutors in mind. In redesigning the course two years ago, faculty checked with me to make sure that writing tutors would be able to help them with the eight laboratory reports that they wanted to assign in the two-quarter course. And again, this year faculty demand for tutors has far out-stripped the supply.

Teaching tutors to teach writing is much easier than teaching faculty: tutors are much less busy, much more eager, much more grateful for the chance to improve their own skills. It's easier to change their teaching habits, and they can train much longer and harder than even the Nuts are willing to. I select tutors by sending a letter to Engineering sophomores and juniors and to all students in the University who have applied for co-terminal status. Coterms are undergraduates who take a fifth year of study and earn their M.S.s and their B.S.s at the end of the fifth year. Sixty per cent of coterms are Engineering students, and the other 40% are from other departments, mostly mathematics, hard sciences and social sciences. Students who want to be tutors submit a portfolio of writing to me, and I select only the best writers to train as tutors. Each year in Spring Quarter I train about twenty-four tutors.

The training course is three units: students read a textbook I wrote about teaching writing, still in manuscript. It's called Writing Better: A Guide to Helping Others (200 pp.). In addition, they teach in selected courses under the supervision of experienced tutors. Finally, they work on their own writing, usually by rewriting an old paper in a form suitable for the business world. About two-thirds finally become tutors in the next year's courses. If they are undergraduates, I pay $6 an hour; if they are Coterms, I pay the equivalent of $13 an hour in cash and tuition benefits. This year I will pay out $9,000 in tutors' wages; they will reach approximately 1,000 students (700,

if corrected for the fact that one student may appear in more than one of our tutored courses).

The faculty and administration of the Engineering School have decided that this project brings reasonable return for reasonable effort. For the cost of one-half a faculty member's salary--if the tutors' wages are added to the portion of mine spent in writing instruction--a huge number of students are taught to write. Two-thirds of the students we reach report that they indeed learned to write better. Though we constantly attempt to improve that figure, it must be interpreted in the light of two facts:

1. the students we serve are mostly juniors and seniors who have already passed the two quarter writing requirement, and

2. the number of papers that they work on in each Engineering course is usually fewer than three.

Besides the educational benefits that accrue to the Engineering students, benefits also accrue to the tutors themselves, who feel much more confident of their abilities to write and to speak persuasively when confronted with the demands of the work world. A spot study of tutor job placement has shown that they command higher paying jobs than those who do not learn to tutor, but this finding must be tempered by the knowledge that tutors usually are already distinguished in their fields. That they are also interested in topics literary attests to their well-roundedness, an unusual trait in any student population.

Writing across the curriculum can be promoted by tapping two little-used resources: the Nuts and the talented students, who can help the Normals. With some planning and a little luck, most WPAs can find and use these resources, perhaps even to assure un-reasonably high returns from everyone's reasonable efforts.